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**“You’re in the Boxing Ring and it’s Just the Two  
of You and it’s Sort of Survival” - The Quest for  
Excitement in Professional Female Muay Thai  
Boxing**

Dissertation submitted in accordance with the  
requirements of the University of Chester for the  
degree of Master of Science

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## **Abstract**

Using a figural sociological approach, this research analyses the motivations of professional female Muay Thai boxers in training and competition, and ways in which they negotiate their elite status in a male-associated sport. To do this, I draw on fourteen semi-structured interviews to analyse the extent to which females in Muay Thai experience a quest for excitement. It is suggested females are motivated to participate as the sport acts as an emotional and physical outlet and is used as a means to gain mimetic satisfactions which men have originally acquired through sports. The participants in this study experienced pleasurable, de-routinising satisfactions associated with taking part in an activity that is considered male-dominated and masculine. Female Muay Thai boxers' experiences of the quest for excitement also incorporate a desire for gender equality by resisting traditional female roles which are often more routinised, and feminine-appropriate sports which can lack in physical contact. Although they experienced enjoyment through their involvement in a male-associated sport, participants often placed emphasis on their femininity to counteract their success. Overall it is argued females can experience a specifically gendered quest for excitement in Muay Thai which differs to men's experiences. This research supplements the minimal existing research on females in martial arts and serves as a comparison to literature on men's and women's experiences of the quest for excitement.

### **Declaration**

I confirm that this work has not been submitted for any other degree of examination. I have read and understood the University's regulations on plagiarism and I declare this as my own original work.

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Signed:..... Date:.....

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# **“You’re in the Boxing Ring and it’s Just the Two of You and it’s Sort of Survival” - The Quest for Excitement in Professional Female Muay Thai Boxing**

## *Introduction*

Women’s involvement and motivations in traditionally masculine activities is a topic of increasing sociological interest. A growing amount of literature has specifically examined female involvement in male-associated team sports, such as rugby, football and cricket (Chase, 2006; Caudwell, 2011; Velija & Malcolm, 2009). More recently, female involvement in face-to-face combat sports has been analysed, in sports such as martial arts and boxing which have historically been considered male-dominated and therefore unsuitable for women (Kim, 2012). This may be due to the traditional view that sparring, fighting and physical strength are understood to be the natural domain of men (Velija et al., 2012). The increasing sociological interest in this area can be aligned with the rising number of women who are occupying former male-exclusive spaces such as masculine sports (Cove & Young, 2007). This trend raises questions concerning women’s motivations to participate and compete in sports and activities where strength, power, aggression and combat are emphasised, characteristics which contrast with long-established ideals of femininity such as weakness and passivity (Thing, 2001).

With this in mind, the purpose of this research is to understand the motivations of females in Muay Thai. Through semi-structured interviews with fourteen professional female Muay Thai boxers, this research investigates how women experience a quest for excitement and how they negotiate their elite status in a masculine sport. It is important to clarify here what the sport of Muay

Thai involves. Muay Thai (also known as Thai boxing) originated in Thailand and is the country's national sport (UK Muay Thai Federation, 2011). It is classified as a 'hard' martial art due to little protective equipment (fighters usually only wear a gum shield and gloves) and the force of the techniques executed in order to score a point. To elaborate, points are awarded by corner judges for techniques that are considered effective, or in other words which move or damage an opponent (Myers, 2007). Muay Thai is known as the art of eight limbs, as participants can use eight parts of their body to strike opponents (UK Muay Thai Federation 2011). According to Spencer (2009, p.122) Muay Thai is a 'standing striking style where practitioners utilise their fists, shins, knees and elbows to strike their opponents.' Muay Thai additionally incorporates stand-up grappling known as the clinch, which involves facing an opponent and wrapping both hands behind their head in order to control them by pulling down (Spencer, 2009).

Similar to Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) Muay Thai involves an authentic, live circumstance to resist and defend oneself against an opponent but differs to MMA due to matches fought only standing (Spencer, 2009). The sport also differs to other stand-up martial arts, such as kickboxing, due to the allowance of elbows and knees and an emphasis placed on using them to gain an advantage over an opponent (UK Muay Thai Federation, 2011). Originally used as training for warfare, Muay Thai gradually evolved into a sport used for entertainment purposes. Major changes to modern Muay Thai took place in the 1930s, with more stringent rules and regulations, including the introduction of gloves and weight divisions (World Muay Thai Council, 2013). Currently, competitors in the United Kingdom fighting professional rules will fight for five three-minute rounds, with elbows and knees to the head allowed. Although no



official statistics at present, the UK Muay Thai Federation (2011) states that Muay Thai is practiced extensively in Southeast Asia and has also become increasingly popular in western societies. For example, at the time of writing the UK Muay Thai Federation (2013) alone has 122 clubs affiliated to them.

Although women's involvement in combat sports has become an area of increasing academic interest, little sociological research has addressed women's boxing (Pfister, 2010). Moreover, little sociological research up to now has specifically focussed on Muay Thai. According to Stickney (2005) a misleading image of martial arts is often given within media representations, meaning views from the general public are often distorted. In particular, media representations seldom focus on the views and experiences of female martial artists (Stickney, 2005). Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research that has addressed the figurational concept of the quest for excitement and how it has the potential to play a role in women's motivations to enter and compete in combat sports. Therefore, the research questions for this study are:

1. What motivates professional female Muay Thai boxers to train and compete?
2. To what extent do professional female Muay Thai boxers experience a quest for excitement?
3. How do professional female Muay Thai boxers negotiate their elite status in a male dominated sport?

Firstly, methodological issues of the research will be given, initially focussing on the theoretical framework that has been adopted. This section will provide an overview and justification for the use of figurational sociology, with explanations of the civilising process, sportization, the quest for excitement and

the examination of gender issues using this theoretical framework. The second section of the methodological issues section will focus on the research methods used within this study, explaining and justifying qualitative research methods, sampling, data collection and data analysis, ethical issues, issues of involvement-detachment and trustworthiness of the data. The conclusion of this chapter includes a table which outlines some basic information and experience levels of each participant interviewed. An extensive review of the literature will then be provided, followed by the results and discussion section which explores several themes which arose within the interviews. Finally, a conclusion, references and appendices will be provided. I will start by giving an overview of figurational sociology.

## **Methodological Issues**

### **Section One – Theoretical Framework**

#### *Introduction to Figurational Sociology*

Figurational sociology analyses long-term social processes including changes and transformations in the past in order to understand current occurrences (Dunning, 1999). Norbert Elias (1897-1990) was the founder of figurational sociology, and one of the few sociologists to consider sport an important area of sociological study (Dunning & Rojek, 1992). From a figurational perspective societies are known as figurations which consist of human beings who are 'fundamentally interdependent' (Van Krieken, 1998, p.12). No one is completely isolated or independent, but instead people have mutual relationships and dependencies with others (Van Krieken, 1998). In other words, networks of interdependencies are formed, and power is a 'structural characteristic of the flow of every figuration' (Van Krieken, 1998, p.57). Power is considered dynamic, in constant fluctuation and 'a function of interdependency ties' (Van Krieken, 1998; Dunning, 2005, p.4). People may be interdependent, but through these interdependencies some have greater power chances than others (Mennell, 1992). Nevertheless, no-one is completely powerful or powerless within figurations. People with greater power chances still rely on others, and opportunities for resistance exist for people with fewer power chances (Mennell, 1992). From a figurational lens it is important to analyse long-term change to understand how societies came to be the way they are. Therefore, Elias' theory of the civilising process will now be explained.

## *The Civilising Process*

The civilising process relates to long-term processes of development, such as the refinement of social rules, standards and conduct from around the sixteenth century onwards and generally in western societies (Mennell, 1992; de Swaan, 2005). Mennell (1992) and Dunning (1999) discuss several aspects of society which have been refined and the growing social pressure to adhere to the required standards of conduct. Throughout the course of the civilising process, there have been expectations of greater individual all-round self-restraint including the refinement of manners and a move towards privatisation of bodily functions (Dunning, 1999). According to Dunning (1999) failure to abide by these social rules may lead to feelings of embarrassment. In addition, there is increasing expectancy to apply self-control to emotions such as aggression (Dunning, 1999). Throughout the civilising process pleasure in inflicting pain and violence, and displaying or witnessing aggressive behaviour, has been largely removed from the individual everyday experience (Mennell, 1992). In the contemporary world it is therefore considered normal to express emotions in a disciplined manner. Feelings of shame or guilt may be apparent if pleasure is derived from violent acts, which may lead to stigmatisation (Mennell, 1992).

An example of this is the idea that many common occurrences in previous societies which often elicited pleasure, such as public executions, would now be repugnant to the majority of people (Mennell, 1992). According to Mennell (1992, p.59) wider societal changes have impacted on people's increasing self-restraint and the reduction of acts carried out through impulse, such as the introduction of a 'central power strong enough to compel people to

restrain their impulses towards violence.’ To elaborate, violence and force is now somewhat controlled by the state. To engage in violent acts without serious consequences has become more difficult which has created more peaceful societies (Dunning, 1999). Different ways of life have been gradually imposed, and people have reacted by engaging in self-control and discipline with appropriate regulation of actions and emotions (Mennell, 1992). However, as Dunning (1999, p.43) suggests, no society is entirely civilised or uncivilised and even the ‘most advanced present-day Western societies [form] part of an extended Middle Ages’.

### *Sportization*

A civilising spurt has also taken place in sport, a process Dunning (1999) names sportization. This refers to the increase in clear and stringent rules and regulations in sport which have become more widespread and standardised through the civilising process. In turn, this has increased fair-play and safety for participants (Green et al., 2005). In the eighteenth and nineteenth century rules were introduced to prizefighting such as round lengths, gloves and weight classes, which transformed this brutal activity to the modern sport of boxing (Sheard, 1997). Similar changes have occurred in sports including rugby in which it was once permitted to engage in hacking, or kicking an opponent's shins with iron-tipped boots (Mennell, 1992). The processes of sportization and parliamentarization are firmly linked, although one did not cause the other (Murphy & Sheard, 2006). Parliamentarization refers to the transformation of parliament from the eighteenth century onwards towards parties using self-restraint and standardised rules to refrain from violence (Mennell, 1992). Parliament became increasingly concerned with democracy and the rule of law

which influenced the reduction in violence in people's pastimes (Stokvis, 1992). Therefore, both parliamentary disputes and leisure activities involve competing according to comprehensive rules in a way in which little violence, danger or risk is apparent (Stokvis, 1992).

### *The Quest for Excitement*

As stated, through the course of the civilising process human beings have regulated how they express emotions and impulses (Van Krieken, 1998). In turn, some spare-time activities are argued to counteract the loss of pleasurable satisfactions related to previous forms of behaviours that were less regulated and more spontaneous (Van Krieken, 1998). Elias and Dunning (1986) state spare-time activities can be split into three categories, which they named the spare-time spectrum. These activities are:

1. Spare-time routines, such as housework, which are structured and generally not considered leisure activities.
2. Spare-time activities that can be routinised but usually involve some feelings of achievement, such as work (voluntary or paid), studying, and watching or reading the news.
3. Leisure activities which usually involve the least routine, and can be split again into three categories. These are relaxation activities (for example sunbathing), activities which are sociable (for example meeting friends), and activities which are mimetic (a wide range of activities which could include watching films, going to concerts, or participating in games of chance and skill which generate tension, such as sport).

Of relevance here is the mimetic sphere of leisure activities. In contrast to everyday life, sport may serve as a 'pleasurable and de-routinizing emotional

arousal' where emotions can be free-flowing (Dunning, 1999, p.3). For example, sport has the potential to elicit mimetic fear, pleasure and joy (Maguire, 1993). Sport can mimic serious situations and provide an aspect of mock danger and fear. Sports generally have a higher possibility of danger than other aspects of leisure, such as cinema, but not to the extent that they cross the boundaries of what is regarded as civilised (Maguire, 1993). Modern sport and leisure activities can be used as a release from controlled emotions and an outlet for aggression and tension, producing emotional excitement (Van Krieken, 1998). As sport generally allows controlled aggression it may counteract the self-restraint within civilised and routinised societies where there is a taboo concerning this behaviour (Dunning, 1999). Ultimately, sport can be used as a quest for excitement by complementing restraint and providing excitement and anxiety, in societies which are often regarded as unexciting and unemotional (Dunning, 1999; Van Krieken, 1998). Thus sport may serve as the intermediary between pleasure and restraint and displays how human emotion is released. This shows that modern leisure activities are directly related to the civilising process (Van Krieken, 1998).

Due to regulations and the internalisation of rules from participants, excitement can be generated in sport without feelings of guilt. Thus people can elicit controlled aggression in a socially acceptable manner (Elias & Dunning, 1986). Of course, the extent to which pleasurable excitement is generated depends on a variety of factors. Maguire (1993) states sport which holds similarities to genuine combat, or mimics struggles between rival groups, may produce emotions which bear a resemblance to those in real-life scenarios. Maguire (1993) uses the example of American football which could be interpreted as a battleground for contests, and Atkinson and Young (2005)

compare greyhound racing to war-like competition. However, it is argued many other sports, including combat sports, could fit into this category. The quality of tension-balances is also important, which may be affected by the level of spontaneity of the activity, with some sports more unpredictable and therefore exciting than others (Maguire, 1992). Particular sports may generate strong emotions such as hatred, apprehension, intimidation, the uncertainty and threat of defeat, and the feeling of victory (Van Krieken, 1998). Thus sport has the possibility to both generate and release tensions (Van Krieken, 1998).

### *Analysing Gender Relations from a Figurational Perspective*

Also relevant to this research is the theme of gender relations. From a figurational perspective, power balances between the sexes have altered in favour of women (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). This is linked directly to the civilising process, the overall structure of the society and state-formation (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). As stated, if society's have a state which is effective in controlling physical force this indicates a higher stage of the civilising process has been attained. Thus within advanced, contemporary societies male violence towards women has become a taboo, and when this does occur it is often hidden from public view (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). Additionally, opportunities for men to use their generally greater physical strength to their advantage have been hindered due to advancements in technology (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). In modern societies fewer jobs require high levels of physical strength and therefore women have less reliance on men (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). In a sporting context, the process of sportization may have also favoured women. Although open to significant debate, it may be



considered that technique and skill are now more important in sport than physical strength alone (Dunning, 1999).

The interdependence between the sexes is also important to consider. The lengthening of interdependency chains throughout the civilising process has meant greater mutual dependencies, understanding and reliance between the sexes (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). A shift in power in favour of women, and a shift in acceptable female habitus and behaviour have occurred, which has led to greater female empowerment to engage in former male preserves such as sport (Dunning, 1999). Of course, changes that have occurred throughout the civilising process, including shifts towards a feminised society, have not been entirely smooth and linear (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). For instance, sport is still male-dominated with little money or media coverage for women (Dunning, 1999). Despite women's empowerment and increasing assertiveness throughout the civilising process, sport may still be considered a space for the expression of male power (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). Sport was created by and for men, and is often considered a place for conveying masculine ideals and values, such as aggression, toughness and a hero image (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). The link between sport and masculinity can create issues for females who participate, who are often labelled unfeminine, butch or lesbian (Dunning & Maguire, 1996).

Therefore, barriers are still evident for female participation, where 'the barriers erected against them have been strongest in contact/combat sports' (Elias & Dunning, 2007, p.326). Combat sports are often considered masculine due to the links between men and fighting (Velija et al., 2012). Male resistance to women's participation in these sports shows the shift in power in favour of

women does not mean complete equality between the sexes (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). However, women have been empowered sufficiently to have the opportunity to enter combat sports, with Dunning and Maguire (1996, p.308) stating:

*They have presumably been motivated in this connection by such things as: (i) an interest in obtaining the sorts of "mimetic", "sociability" and "motility" satisfaction that can be obtained from sports by men, together with the sorts of gains regarding identity, self-concept, self-assurance and habitus (e.g. greater feelings of security in public spaces and greater ability to defend themselves against a physical attack) which can accrue in that connection; and (ii) a desire for equality with men as a result of frustrations experienced over the constraints and limitations traditionally placed on female roles.*

From this perspective it can be argued that many routinised activities, such as housework and childcare, have been traditionally dominated by women in patriarchal societies (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). Even within sport women have often had the responsibilities of routinised activities such as providing refreshments to male athletes or driving children to sports clubs (Dunning, 1999). It is therefore presumed females may have entered sport as it provides a higher level of excitement, impulsivity, emotional release and mimesis which

counteracts these roles and has the potential to increase self-confidence and self-assurance (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). Although there is an increasing amount of literature dedicated to understanding women's participation in male-associated sports, little research has discussed this in relation to the quest for excitement. Liston (2006a) also suggests there is a need to generate more knowledge on women's motivations in sport using figurational sociology in order to enhance the theory's scope in analysing gender relations. The research methods used within this study will now be explained and justified.

## **Section Two – Research Methods**

This chapter will outline the methods adopted within this research, the justification and the strengths and limitations for this approach. According to Walliman (2011) adopting the most appropriate methods for a piece of research is vital for quality data. It is therefore important that the methods adopted are appropriate to the research questions in order to provide the most effective means of exploring the substantive themes to the greatest extent (Roberts, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). This research uses a qualitative research design, which is defined by Roberts (2009, p.222) as ‘any work that is not primarily numerical’, including data collection methods such as interviews, observations and questionnaires which use open-ended questions. A qualitative design is often selected in order to best understand how people construct the world around them (Gibbs, 2007). Qualitative research can be useful when an issue is best explored by analysing people’s opinions, views and beliefs, to understand how social processes are formed and the significance of meanings that are generated (Mason, 2011).

Qualitative research additionally requires a ‘grasp of the subjective meaning of social action’, where data is usually in the form of words (Smith, 2010, p.8). The methods adopted within this research are relevant to a qualitative paradigm as it is often difficult to quantify people’s experiences (Walliman, 2011). However, qualitative research relies on quantitative implications, and vice versa, meaning the two are not mutually exclusive (Bloyce, 2004). For example, Bloyce (2004, p.153-154) states ‘quantitative research rests on qualitative assumption at the initial and interpretative stages, it is inadequate to argue that one’s strategy can be one or the other’ and to be

restricted by a certain methodological framework is unsuitable when the nature of the problem should be the factor that influences the strategy used. The research adopts a case-study research design, which is defined by Bryman (2008) as an investigation focussing upon a specific individual exemplar, such as a single community which is rigorously examined. This is suitable to understand the motivations of one group with clear boundaries (Creswell, 2007). An in-depth discussion of the sampling methods will now take place.

### *Sampling*

In order to gather participants for the study, purposive sampling was employed. The research aimed to discover the motivations of Muay Thai boxers who are:

1. Female.
2. Professionals or former professionals who had retired within the past three years (professional Muay Thai fighters are defined as such as they receive a purse from a fight, and usually contracts are signed between promoters and fighters. In contrast, amateur Muay Thai fighters usually only receive ticket commission from shows).
3. Aged eighteen or over.

Purposive sampling allowed participants to be gathered who are relevant to the research questions, meaning all participants are applicable to the case-study examined (Bryman, 2008). All participants met this criterion which has ensured the data's accuracy and quality and made certain the research is representative of unique people with these specific characteristics (Creswell, 2007; Matthews & Ross, 2010). Fifteen potential participants were contacted about the study via social networking sites in December 2012. These

participants were recognised as professional Muay Thai boxers through my own knowledge, awareness and participation in the sport, and information provided from a local Muay Thai boxing club. Information about these participants can be found in table one, at the conclusion of this chapter.

Initial contact with potential participants involved a brief description confirming the purpose of the study, and to gauge any initial participatory interest. Out of the fifteen participants who were initially contacted, fourteen showed interest in being involved. A letter of invitation (see appendix A), participant information sheet (see appendix B) and informed consent form (see appendix C) were then emailed to these individuals. Fourteen participants were considered sufficient to answer the research questions effectively. Prior research within this topic has used a similar number, such as Liston's (2005) and Mennesson's (2000) studies regarding females in male-associated sports. In addition, practical time restraints had to be considered (Darlington & Scott, 2002) and fourteen interviews were considered a manageable number without restricting the amount of data collected. The number of participants can also be justified due to the uniqueness of the group studied, as the sample consisted of professional females in a full-contact, minority sport. After fourteen interviews, saturation was reached through repetition of answers from participants.

### *Data Collection*

Semi-structured interviews were used as the sole method of data collection. Although the gathering of quality data within interviews relies heavily on the good skills of the researcher, interviews were considered the most appropriate data collection method to gain people's perspectives which often cannot be directly observed (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Semi-structured

interviews were specifically chosen as they are considered less limiting than structured interviews, due to the flexibility offered through the permissible use of follow-up questions when the researcher feels this is necessary to explore further relevant themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An outline of the topics and questions covered can be found in the interview schedule which was used to guide the conversation (see appendix D), but the order of these questions was determined by the flow of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Follow up questions were also asked to gain additional in-depth knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Unstructured interviews were also considered, where questions are formulated only as the interview proceeds (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, effective unstructured interviews often require highly experienced interviewers to gain relevant data (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). Due to few interviewing experiences, semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate for this study. The limitations of interviews include gaining access to only words and not actions, and the fact events which occurred in the past may be interpreted differently in the present (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Nevertheless, interviews allow participants to reflect back on past events and consider their future experiences (Darlington & Scott, 2002).

Informal conversation was made via email and social networking sites with all participants prior to interviews. The participants and I both held similar backgrounds as females in the martial arts. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest shared characteristics increase the familiarity and trust between researchers and participants. Individual interviews lasted for approximately thirty minutes and all were conducted via telephone at an appropriate time and date for participants. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012) telephone interviews are often useful when participants are based in different locations which are not

easily accessible for the researcher, making it the most convenient option for this research. Although previous research shows there is little difference between the quality and quantity of data attained in telephone interviews in comparison to face-to-face interviews, the limitations of this approach must be taken into consideration (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It is argued there is a greater chance of interviewees terminating an interview early on the phone and there is a possibility for technical difficulties (Bryman, 2008). It can also be harder to build up rapport with participants in telephone interviews due to the lack of visual and emotional cues which may be required to gain detailed responses (Creswell, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Nevertheless, telephone interviews can work as an alternative to face-to-face interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### *Data Analysis*

This investigation took a deductive approach, meaning a conclusion was 'reached by deduction from the combination of a theory and some facts about a specific case' (Smith, 2010, p.200). In this instance figurational sociology was chosen as the theoretical lens and the findings of the study have been tested against it. In order to begin the data analysis process, phones were put on loudspeaker and interviews recorded using a dictaphone. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to analyse the data in text form (Gibbs, 2007). The transcriptions were then read and re-read to gain familiarity before thematic analysis was used (Bryman, 2008). Firstly, raw data considered relevant and interesting to the study was extracted into separate tables, keeping initials of participants next to their responses and keeping quotes in context (Gibbs, 2007). Themes and repetitions were then identified within the raw data, which were grouped together into categories and given a code which captured its



meaning theoretically and analytically (Grbich, 2007). These are known as first order themes and general dimensions were then created through grouping these together into categories (Silverman, 2011). Due to the large volume of data collected, four detailed general dimensions were created which form the basis of the results and discussion section. According to Bryman (2008) thematic analysis has limitations due to the lack of distinctive, specific and clear techniques. However, thematic analysis can be used successfully to create themes and subthemes central to the research (Bryman, 2008).

### *Ethics*

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research and the safety and welfare of participants was a priority. Denscombe (2010) states that as all participants were eighteen years old or above, informed consent was the only form of consent required (see appendix C). Returning the signed informed consent form via post was essential prior to starting the interviews. Before returning the informed consent form, participants were given sufficient information within the participant information sheet in order to make an informed choice to participate or not (see appendix B). This included the purpose of the study, what was required from them, what would be done with the results, the time commitment, procedures to make a complaint, and the fact interviews would be recorded. Adequate information, at a reading level suitable for the participants, is essential for participants to make an informed choice about participation in the study (Denscombe, 2010). It is vital not to oversimplify information as participant's ideas can be distorted (Oliver, 2003). However, technical terms which participants may not understand must also be avoided and this was taken into consideration (Oliver, 2003). Participants had several

opportunities to ask questions, from the initial contact to immediately prior to the interviews.

In line with Bryman (2008), participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, without consequences, and for the information they had provided thus far to be destroyed. Participants' views and opinions were respected and individuals were warned of any possible risks that could occur within the research. As the study only involved interviews, no physical harm was possible. The study did not involve sensitive topics which minimised the risk for psychological harm, and participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable with (Smith, 2010). All participants who were involved in the research did so voluntarily and at no time were participants coerced into being involved (see appendix A, B & C). Within this study, anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and therefore participant's real names have not been identified. Names, clubs or identifiable information that participants mentioned throughout the interviews have also been omitted to protect others' anonymity (Smith, 2010). Confidentiality of data has been ensured through storage of data on a password protected computer, which only I have access to. This means the data is not accessible to others, and in line with the University of Chester, this data will be stored for a minimum of ten years.

#### *Involvement-Detachment*

Elias' concept of involvement-detachment is also useful to consider within this section. Involvement-detachment relates to objectivity within social science research to gain trustworthy knowledge from an insider's perspective (Mennell, 1992). It is considered impossible to be absolutely involved or

absolutely detached from research, and therefore the ideal is a balance between the two (Mennell, 1992). Although it is not viable to completely abandon the culture of the subject studied and personal opinions, a level of detachment may be required to minimise inaccuracy of data and skewed results affected by the researcher's thoughts, feelings and biases (Mansfield, 2007). Due to my involvement in the studied area, it is essential to maintain a degree of detachment and self-distance to ensure accuracy of data and to diminish biased arguments. However, it is acknowledged that discarding personal feelings entirely is not possible (Mansfield, 2007). A degree of detachment and reflexivity was maintained throughout all aspects of the research, including the literature review and results and discussion sections. Minimising personal values and theoretical inclinations, and keeping an open-mind throughout the research process has increased the confirmability of the research to by reducing bias (Bryman, 2008). Contradictory arguments, literature and results which do not necessarily reflect my experiences and opinions have been included to show a variety of perspectives. This has increased the authenticity of the research findings by representing viewpoints fairly (Bryman, 2008).

### *Trustworthiness*

A range of methods were employed to increase the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility is related to the accuracy of the research findings (Pitney & Parker, 2009). Credibility was increased by sending transcripts and a simplified version of the research findings back to participants, known as member validation (Bryman, 2008). According to Bryman (2008) this minimises the risk of misinterpreting data and ensures an accurate understanding of participants' responses. Prior to this, transcripts were checked and re-checked for mistakes

to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Within the interviews, neutral and open-ended questions were used to increase the reliability of participants' answers by not suggesting a response (Bryman, 2008). In addition, dependability was considered which relates to a clear, consistent and logical research process (Pitney & Parker, 2009). To increase the dependability of the research accounts of each stage of the research process have been kept, including transcripts, recordings, data analysis and completed consent forms, to ensure best practice and correct procedures have been maintained, and are available for others (Bryman, 2008).

All interviews followed similar procedures, important for consistent research methods (Creswell, 2009). For instance there was little variation in the initial questions asked and the length of the interviews between each participant. As a final point, transferability relates to the extent to which the results of a study can be transferred to another context (Pitney & Parker, 2009). Qualitative research does not always aim for transferability due to a focus on the context of particular participant's experiences (Pitney & Parker, 2009). However, an in-depth, detailed description of the purpose of the research, methodology, participants and results are provided to give the opportunity for readers to make their own decisions on transferring the results to other settings (Bryman, 2008). For this purpose a detailed description of participants is provided in table one.

**Table One**

This table includes relevant information including the experience levels of each participant without compromising their anonymity.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years in Sport</b>	<b>Years Fighting</b>	<b>Fight Status</b>	<b>Titles</b>
<b>Beth</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>Amy</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>Laura</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Retired 2012</b>	<b>British</b>
<b>Emily</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>Retired 2012</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Imogen</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Zoe</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Jade</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Holly</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Louise</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Retired 2012</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Hayley</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Retired 2011</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Chloe</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Retired 2012</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Eva</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>British</b>
<b>Sophie</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>
<b>Olivia</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Fighting</b>	<b>World</b>

The names of all participants in the above table and throughout the research are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity. The next section of this dissertation is a review of the relevant literature and will start with a brief overview of the pertinent themes that are included in the section.

## Literature Review

This chapter of the dissertation will firstly discuss combat sports as a mimetic activity for men, as little research has discussed women's experiences of the quest for excitement. This section includes an analysis of trends of violence and masculinity within combat sports, and issues that may arise from women's participation. Literature regarding the social and historical construction of gender will then be discussed, followed by the motivations of women to become involved in sports which contradict gender ideologies. These themes will offer a basis for understanding incentives of women to participate in Muay Thai boxing, despite the stigma they may face through participation. Women's desire for equality with men will then be considered before examining how females deal with the masculine/feminine contradiction through their participation and success in a male-associated sport. These themes will now be discussed in further detail, with much of the literature based on male-associated sports such as boxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), rugby and football. This is due to the shortage of research within the field of Muay Thai. The literature review will start with an analysis of boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) in relation to the quest for excitement.

### *The Quest for Excitement in Combat Sports*

Various recent studies have analysed combat sports in relation to violence. In particular, boxing and the more recent sport of MMA are generally considered to be the most brutal and physically challenging of sports and a growing amount of literature has focused on understanding trends of violence in training and competition (Spencer, 2009). As previously noted, Sheard's (1997) analysis of boxing suggests the sport has undergone a civilising spurt from the

early days of prize-fighting. A similar process is discussed by Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) who analyse the sportization process that has taken place from No-Holds Barred contests to MMA competitions in the 1990s. Originally these contests were typified by extreme acts of overt aggression where almost any attack was permitted, but due to resistance and shock at the ferocity of the contests, further rules and regulations were implemented which contributed to the institution of modern MMA (Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). Weight classifications were introduced and moves such as head butting and finger breaking were prohibited to make the sport comparably safer and more regulated (Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). Overall, this suggests that in order to obtain pleasure from sport, boundaries must be placed on violence to minimise danger and increase enjoyment for both spectators and participants.

However, even with more stringent rules MMA still involves inflicting pain on opponents, using the body as a weapon to ultimately achieve victory (Spencer, 2009). According to Sanchez and Malcolm (2010) the key objective within combat sports is to harm an opponent, creating a rare opportunity for the de-controlling of emotional control for participants. It is stated 'combat sports are inherently contentious as they necessarily exist close to the boundary between 'real' and 'mock' fighting' (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010, p.39). In other words, in advanced, civilised societies there is minimal real danger and people generally live longer lives without everyday risk or fear (Dunning, 1999). MMA could therefore be classed as a mimetic activity and a mock battle, used by MMA fighters as a substitute to real-life, extreme danger which is rare in everyday life (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). MMA is adequately real to allow feelings of mimetic excitement, but rules and regulations have been put in place to ensure it does not cross the threshold of repugnance, that serious injury is

minimal, and that excitement remains pleasurable (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010; Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). This evidence suggests that MMA may be a site to experience a quest for excitement, creating tension-balances, with potential for MMA fighters to express emotions that are rarely shown in everyday life.

According to Atkinson (2002) spectatorship in combat sports can produce different experiences of the quest for excitement. Although audiences are not directly involved in the fights, professional wrestling has an exciting significance as a staged fight, eliciting a wide range of emotions such as fear, pleasure, sadness and joy. Audiences enjoy professional wrestling due to theatrical violence, and perceptions there are few dangerous consequences (Atkinson, 2002). As violence is often a taboo in other social realms, spectatorship in professional wrestling may be an unusual circumstance for spectators where this behaviour is acceptable. The sportization process may have also enhanced pleasurable excitement as it has become more uncertain to spectators who will win or lose. For example, the implementation of weight categories has prolonged pleasurable excitement by making it increasingly harder for audiences to know who will be successful (Sheard, 1997). Ultimately it is argued in contemporary combat sports tension-balances can be created for spectators as well as participants.

Traditionally men are considered to have the capabilities of fighters, and combat sports often mimic forms of fighting (Dunning & Maguire, 1996). Combat sports embody a culture of danger, risk and physical contact which facilitates a mock battle (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Liston, 2005). It is argued that combat sports are exciting for both participants and audiences as they embody characteristics of sport such as competitiveness, confrontation, aggression,



fast-paced action, violence and pain (Atkinson, 2002; Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010; Liston, 2005). These are considered active emotions and characteristics often associated with men and which convey images of hegemonic masculinity, a patriarchal gender construction that subordinates women (Thing, 2001; Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Spencer (2009) adds MMA fighter's identities are exposed through injuries such as bruises, black eyes, cuts and broken bones. MMA fighters endure the demands of the sport and may reject potential long-term consequences to health, often a way to express courage, a win-at-all-costs mentality, and a strong fighting spirit (Spencer, 2009). These traits are often understood as overtly masculine and innate characteristics for men. This research therefore suggests that combat sports, and aspects of the quest for excitement, have direct links to masculinity.

Spencer (2009, p.120) goes on to argue that in order to be successful in martial arts, participants are required to increase the pain threshold and achieve a body of 'strength, speed, endurance, hardness and, foremost, a body of giving and taking pain'. This is reflected within the media, where martial arts are represented with images of violence and masculinity (Stickney, 2005). Danger and violence are publically considered a clear indicator of masculinity and 'only for "real" men', and fighters may therefore aspire to these dominant images (Hirose & Pih, 2010, p.198; Spencer, 2009). As sport was constructed as a male domain, boys from a young age are commonly encouraged to engage in sport to increase confidence, popularity and acceptance (Ross & Shinew, 2008). Ultimately, as combat sports are clearly linked with masculinity, they may be of importance to men to develop masculine values, expectations and identities, or a masculine habitus (Spencer, 2009; Liston, 2005). In turn, female

participation may be understood as intimidating, an intrusion or a threat to men's habitus, creating feelings of resistance (Liston, 2005).

In recent years this may have become more prominent, as an increasing amount of women are entering a wide range of male-associated sports, including combat sports. For example, there has been a surge in female boxing since the early 1990s which 'is stamping a new character on a sport which has traditionally symbolized the 'essence' of working-class maleness' (Hargreaves, 1997, p.35). At the elite level there has also been progress, for instance at London 2012 women boxed at the Olympic Games for the first time, and the first female Ultimate Fighting Championship fight (the largest MMA promotional company worldwide) took place in February 2013 (Lindner, 2012; Martin, 2013). From a figural perspective, Liston (2005) explains this as the balance of power altering in favour of women through the civilising process. Although it does not mean complete gender equality, this slight shift has allowed women to enter former male-exclusive activities such as combat sports (Liston, 2005). Ultimately female intrusion into sports which embody masculinity raises questions regarding females' management of identity when going against stereotypical feminine characteristics such as weakness and passivity (Thing, 2001).

### *The Social and Historical Construction of Femininity*

Noticeable differences between men and women have arguably influenced our perceptions about what is innately male or female (Liston, 2005). For instance, different ways of dressing, conversation topics and typical sports males and females play are often perceived as natural differences to biological determinists (Hargreaves, 2007). However, sociologists of sport have often

been critical of this position (Hargreaves, 2007). According to Pfister (2010), gender is socially and culturally constructed, and therefore does not relate to biological differences between men and women. Attributes associated with males and females, masculinity and femininity respectively, are performed and enacted (Pfister, 2010). This suggests that gender is something people do and can be seen in almost every area of society (Pfister, 2010). For instance, people embody masculinity and femininity through everyday actions such as gestures and posture, showing the body is 'a site for the reproduction' of gender (Caudwell, 2003, p.376).

According to Hargreaves (1993) feminine stereotypes materialised in the Victorian era, particularly for the middle and upper classes. These women were usually constrained to the domestic sphere, which was considered the natural order of things (Hargreaves, 1993). Women were considered physically inferior in terms of their ability in other realms of social life and thus their position in society was considered fixed and unchangeable (Hargreaves, 1993). The modern forms of many sports surfaced in the Victorian era and were commonly considered contradictory to appropriate femininity. The widespread view was that sport would masculinise women and would damage their health, which was supported by scientific 'evidence' (Wilson, 2010; Pfister, 2010). For instance, Hargreaves (1993) states that in the Victorian era intense physical activity was believed to be harmful to female procreative functions. Consequently, women were usually restricted to the role of supporter (Hargreaves, 1993). The exceptions to this rule were sports such as swimming and tennis which were considered suitable as women often participated recreationally, showed restraint, and little physical exertion was involved (Hargreaves, 1993; Parker, 2010). A feminine appearance could therefore be maintained with little threat to

men's societal position (Parker, 2010). These sports were considered relatively physically harmless, and Victorian arguments 'suggested that the female body was, simply, not suited for the pursuit of athletic activities. The exclusion of women was framed by discourses of protection' (Lindner, 2012, p.466). Overall, this suggests that sport was constructed as a masculine activity and women were considered outsiders (Pfister, 2010).

Despite this, women in the Victorian era did challenge these ideologies. For example, a minority of women participated in boxing and competed in female boxing championships (Hargreaves, 1997). However, these women were considered deviant for going against established ideals of femininity. Even in contemporary societies emphasised femininity remains dominant for women, a gender construction promoted in several areas such as the media (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2009). For instance, leading up to the London 2012 Olympics there were still arguments against women's boxing and these arguments were 'frighteningly reminiscent of medical, political and social discourses emerging in the historical context of the Victorian "invention" of modern sports' (Lindner, 2012, p.466). This research suggests that less extreme versions of Victorian gender ideals have continued into modern times, and when women do participate in sports considered unsuitable, they (and other people) may consider their femininity to be compromised (Dunning, 1999). From a figurational perspective, changes in balances of power in wider society explain women's entrance into former male preserves, such as sport and the workplace. However, women may have had to prove that these activities could be compatible with longstanding notions of femininity (Hargreaves, 1993).

These dominant ideologies concerning women in sport may have a wide range of negative effects. In her study of females in rugby, Chase (2006) states there are limited opportunities for females to become involved in contact sports initially, due to perceptions these sports are a male-preserve and linked to male identity. Females may also be unwilling to participate themselves, as contact sports are constructed as masculine, exclusively male activities (Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Chase (2006) also argues the ideal body in contact sports such as rugby (usually physically strong, muscular and linked to masculinity) is often considered contradictory to the female body and therefore a dominant, influential and powerful female bodily ideal has been created (Liimakka, 2011). The ideal female shape may reflect social stereotypes of femininity and is arguably expected to be slim and toned but with little muscularity to fit societal expectations and be desirable to men (Velija et al., 2012). The ideal female body should be free from injury, with a common societal perception that 'women are not supposed to engage in full-contact, physical activity that may mark their bodies with bruises, broken bones and missing teeth' (Carlson, 2010, p.436). Females in masculine sports may oppose this ideal by risking injury and potentially gaining muscularity which is arguably considered unattractive, deviant and unnatural (Liimakka, 2011; Lafferty & McKay, 2004). Instead, women are often encouraged to take up 'soft' sports such as swimming, focussing on strict body management to attain the supposedly ideal female shape (Pfister, 2010).

Aside from physical appearance ideals, a common perception is women are not naturally aggressive (Thing, 2001). In contemporary society acting aggressively in any realm of social life is usually unacceptable behaviour, largely a consequence of the civilising process. However, it is considered that

women especially should not express emotions such as aggression freely (Thing, 2001). Instead it is expected that restraint is shown and emotions are regulated (Mennell, 1992). Therefore, displays of aggressive behaviour are often deemed inappropriate as women should have emotional control (Thing, 2001). Demonstrations of femininity have therefore become almost compulsory and showing aggression opposes this ideal (Mennesson, 2012). With the restraints and contradictions that are evident for women, and the potential stigma attached to participation, questions are raised of female's motivations to occupy space in masculine sports (Halbert, 1997).

### *Motivations for Females to Participate in Male-Associated Sports*

As stated, women have historically been restricted by ideals of femininity formed in the Victorian era, and limited to the role of supporter (Hargreaves, 1993). Although an increasing number of women are entering former male preserves, ideals of appropriate female behaviour still remain and it is important to consider women's motivations to enter masculine sports which contradict femininity. From the research by Wedgwood (2004) and Liston (2005) it is suggested females grew up valuing masculine over feminine activities, were familiar with contact sports from early childhood, or simply enjoyed going against feminine restraints (Wedgwood, 2004; Liston, 2005). By way of contrast, in Stickney's (2005) study women in karate came into the sport later in life, after growing up considering martial arts as male-dominated and consequently having little incentive to participate. When these women did participate, they found it a supportive, sociable environment which motivated them to continue (Stickney, 2005). Another incentive is argued to be the quest for excitement which may be available through participation (Thing, 2001).

Thing's (2001) research focuses on women in male-associated team sports and it was found participation had the potential to elicit pleasurable excitement and emotional fulfilment through the loosening of self-control (Thing, 2001). Comparable to Sanchez and Malcolm's (2010) study of MMA, females in the study by Thing (2001) counteracted civilising restraints that are evident in contemporary societies. They were able to live out a variety of emotions not expected or available to them in everyday life through aggressive play which, ultimately, motivated them to participate (Thing, 2001). Although Wedgwood's (2004) research did not specifically focus on the quest for excitement, similar to Thing (2001) it was found that women in Australian-rules football used their sport as a means to experience freedom, and to release aggression in a relatively safe manner. Females in this research discussed the contact element of the game as an adrenaline rush which can be used as an outlet (Wedgwood, 2004). In modern societies, lives can be routinised and evidence suggests that the physicality within contact sports is a significant motivating factor for females to become and stay involved in a variety of masculine sports. Females are often considered less aggressive, less assertive and more co-operative than men and by engaging in contact sports females may counteract these expectations and restraints (McNaughton, 2012; Thing, 2001).

As briefly mentioned previously, women particularly have also been restrained through 'the constraints and limitations traditionally placed on female roles', such as the domestic sphere (Dunning, 1999, p.231). Dunning (1999) argues in most societies up to now, females have dominated routinised and restrained activities such as housework and childcare. Similar to men, sport may therefore be regarded by women as a mimetic activity, counteracting everyday boredom in post-industrial life. However, women's experiences of the

quest for excitement may differ as their participation counteracts traditional female roles which are often more routinised. Women may have had to break boundaries by confronting conventional female norms in order to participate (Dunning, 1999). Therefore, Dunning (1999) argues that a presumed motivation for women to participate in male-associated sports is to counteract the limitations that have been placed on them, challenge what women are supposed to do and how they are supposed to behave, and gain similar satisfactions from playing sport that men originally acquired. A further motivation for women may therefore be a desire for equality with men (Dunning, 1999).

#### *The Desire for Equality with Men*

Relevant to the aspiration for gender equality is the development of physical strength for women which can challenge gender ideals. Through martial arts, it was found women can develop physical strength to effectively defend themselves if necessary and therefore challenge perceptions of women as fragile, weak and dependent (Velija et al., 2012). Through participation females may change the traditional view of women, emphasising the idea that women should be allowed to compete in any sport and are not weaker than men per se (Stickney, 2005; Pfister, 2010). Sports such as rugby may also have the potential to allow women to accomplish skills they were previously told they were not capable of, making women aware of their abilities and physical strength (Chase, 2006). Participation in sports can consequently mean women have the potential to be viewed by both men and other women as strong, assertive and competent people (Blinde et al., 1994). Therefore, some women experience empowerment by resisting specific notions of femininity such as



weakness and fragility, a view which suggests women are inferior (Wedgwood, 2004; Thing, 2001). Messner (1988, p.198) states that growth in female athleticism is a 'genuine quest by women for equality, control of their own bodies, and self-definition', in which women confront sporting male dominance.

However, Channon (2013) implies that it may only be sports that are gender-integrated that challenge male power by allowing men to see women's sporting potential. Gender-integrated sports are defined as sports in which men and women train or compete with one another, for instance martial arts and boxing are often gender-integrated in training. From the perspective of Channon (2013), gender-segregated sports such as rugby may not provide a means for women's equality with men. This is because they may, to some extent, legitimise male superiority by creating perceptions that women are physically and mentally incapable of competing with and against men. In other words, gender-segregation emphasises physical differences between men and women which render women inferior, and may therefore reproduce patriarchy and sexism (Pfister, 2010; Anderson, 2008). From this perspective, gender-integrated sports promote and provide physical equality between men and women, 'the likes of which sex-segregated sports cannot, by definition, provide' and therefore gender-integrated sports may challenge notions of sport as a male domain (Channon, 2013, p.2).

For instance, women in martial arts are often respected as athletes and leaders by men, as through integrated training men have opportunities to see women's capabilities in the sport as both coaches and participants, with few differences in the training regimes of males and females (Channon, 2013). A similar view is displayed in Stickney's (2005) research, in which women in

karate were empowered by their abilities to accomplish skills equally to men, and therefore the link between physical capability and masculinity was eradicated (Stickney, 2005). Ross and Shinen (2008, p.41) agree, stating 'women athletes who are skilled and forceful subjects, and who embody power, challenge the equation of physical power with masculinity'. Although it has been a gradual process, and women have not gained complete equality, it is argued women are 'undergoing processes of emancipation' (Liston, 2005, p.81). In other words, participation in male-associated sports and training alongside men may have the potential to increase women's power chances. Consequently, this evidence suggests that men and women can be seen as equals within training, specifically in the martial arts. However, conflicting arguments exist and questions have been raised whether female involvement in masculine sports challenges or accentuates the traditional gender order (Wedgwood, 2004). This can be highlighted by examining male resistance to women's participation.

Relevant to this theme is the sport of boxing. Rules within boxing, such as shorter round lengths for female boxers in comparison to males, show evidence of structural limitations and resistance (Cove & Young, 2007). Women are often capable of fighting for the same time as men meaning this rule could be considered a means to limit female power in the boxing figuration. Within Cove and Young's (2007, p.267) research it is recognised that rules such as these are in place 'for a societal reason, a cultural reason, that has been the tradition they started'. Boxing is not the only sport where different rules apply for women. Direct shoulder contact is forbidden for females, but not males, in Gaelic football in Ireland, and similar rules apply in ice-hockey (Liston, 2005). When men's performances are considered the norm, these rules make it harder

for women to meet these standards and consequently women may be regarded as inferior (Pfister, 2010). Ultimately, this body of evidence suggests women's participation in masculine sports does not necessarily mean gender issues are removed (Pfister, 2010). Although it has been argued women desire equality with men by confronting stereotypically feminine characteristics, women may also emphasise these characteristics to avoid stigma. Gender is a key aspect of our identities and this can become a paradox for females who have to cope with success in masculine sports alongside pressures to display femininity (Sailors, 2013; Guerandel & Mennesson, 2007).

### *Dealing with the Masculine/Feminine Contradiction*

It is a common expectation that women have lower sporting abilities than men, hence women who excel in sport may be considered too physically adept and hence masculine to be 'real' women (Ross & Shiner, 2008). As a result, these women may be interpreted as possessing masculine qualities which are beyond the feminine norm (Ross & Shiner, 2008). If women are considered overly masculine they may be subjected to stigma and stereotypes of being butch or lesbian, showing assumptions of sexuality is commonplace (Mennesson, 2012; Liston, 2005). Consequently, females may be subjected to the lesbian label, regardless of their sexuality, which becomes a problem when women are discouraged from participating (by themselves or others) because of this. Evidently, homophobia and heterosexism are issues for men in sport too; until recently very few male athletes have identified as homosexual, despite an increasing visibility for gay men in other social spheres (Carless, 2012). Therefore, this evidence suggests that sport remains a site for the expression of hegemonic masculinity, where homosexuality and femininity are considered a

disadvantage, creating issues for women and gay men (Carless, 2012). To counteract their involvement in masculine sports, females may emphasise femininity, which has been termed the 'female apologetic' (Broad, 2001).

One of these sports may be boxing, due to the idea it is 'one of the most masculine and gender-defined cultural institutions' and a sport of extreme physical exertion intended to enhance fighting skill (Kim, 2012, p.103). It is a sport associated with bravery, willpower and a strong, masculine body, and therefore women's participation may prove problematic (Hargreaves, 1997). Mennesson's (2000) research shows her sample of female boxers engage in high levels of self-management when not competing in order to enhance their femininity, for instance through their choice of outfit after a fight. Females in savate (a form of French boxing) within the same research attempted to display a feminine side of the sport through the use of high kicks and combinations, considered more feminine than punching (Mennesson, 2000). It is suggested that this sample of women in savate complied with sexualised images of themselves in the media to enhance femininity (Mennesson, 2012). Overall, this suggests there are a variety of ways in which women can display femininity in order to counteract sports participation, many of which they do willingly.

However, in the sample investigated by Chase (2006), female rugby players resisted societal expectations of femininity and confronted arguments against their involvement directly. Adult female wrestlers in Sisjord and Kristiansen's (2008) research were exposed to muscularity long enough to be comfortable with this which they considered vital to success. This indicates that females can overcome ideals of femininity such as weakness in order to be successful. Nevertheless, female wrestlers in the research by Sisjord and

Kristiansen (2008) were still constrained to show other feminine characteristics to counteract their strength. Injuries such as black eyes and bruises are often celebrated by men, who often show injuries with pride (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). In comparison, female wrestler's injuries are understood as a dilemma which contradicts a feminine appearance (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008). Further identity management may be necessary for females who are compelled to display a feminine image in particular sports such as wrestling. Overall, some women display the ideals of femininity formed by men through the civilising process and although participation may be regarded as cathartic, displaying femininity to counteract this may be considered a constraint (Mennell, 1992). The next section of this research will provide an analysis of the results from the interviews conducted, using several of the themes discussed above to analyse females' motivations in Muay Thai in relation to the figurational concept of the quest for excitement.

## Presentation of Findings and Discussion of Results

### ***“You’re in the boxing ring and it’s just the two of you and its sort of survival” - Muay Thai as a Mimetic Activity***

As defined by Van Krieken (1998, p.146) mimetic activities are those which refer to ‘the imitation of real-life situations arousing a variety of emotions, but in ‘safe’ forms without the risk attached to the real thing’. It is suggested that Muay Thai involves elements of mimesis for female participants as the sport has some relations to ‘real’ fighting, but is comparably safer. The similarity to ‘real’ fighting is one of the aspects that make the sport exciting in relatively safe, civilised societies. For example, Chloe stated *“it’s probably the truest form of fighting.”* Therefore, Muay Thai may be perceived by competitors as an authentic activity which is adequately real to mimic dangerous situations. Hayley agreed, suggesting:

*As a martial art I feel it’s the most kind of real,  
kind of full on, you know they are not flicking  
kicks, we are hitting with real and true intention.*

Hayley’s statement that the sport is *“the most kind of real”* indicates it mimics real-life danger and therefore has the possibility of creating pleasurable mimetic excitement but with specific rules (Dunning, 1999). As Sanchez and Malcolm (2010) state in their study of MMA, a sport needs to adequately real in order to generate excitement. Comparable to MMA, Muay Thai may be described as a move towards “real” fighting but is distinguishable from this sphere of activities due to rules and regulations and therefore minimal true danger (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). Other participants discussed the high physical demands of the sport and the need to overcome anxieties. They

associated the sport to serious situations such as combat, showing likeness to the research regarding American football by Maguire (1993). For instance, Eva says what she enjoys the most is *“having that kind of challenge when you’re in the ring and being able to think under pressure”* and Beth discussed her enjoyment of a recent fight, stating *“the fight I absolutely loved it, it were proper war”*. Olivia specifically discussed Muay Thai as an activity that created stronger feelings of what could be described as mimetic excitement than other sports she had participated in:

*You’re in the boxing ring, it’s just the two of you  
and it’s sort of survival, but when you run it’s  
just you’re going to run around a track sort of  
thing and you’re going to survive at the end.*

Fighting is perceived by Olivia as a chance to experience survival. One of the arguments expressed by Dunning (1999) is that through the course of the civilising process there is minimal real danger in modern western societies. Most sports have an element of mimesis but sports such as Muay Thai resemble real combat and therefore may generate similar emotions that are also expressed in fighting (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Maguire, 1993). Overall, this indicates that the level of mimesis produced is dependent on the sport, and it is difficult to obtain the height of these emotions outside of sports which replicate combat. It is argued this is a major incentive for women to be involved in Muay Thai, as strong feelings can be produced specifically when competing. Therefore, as argued by Sanchez and Malcolm (2010) regarding MMA, a sport’s ability to produce pleasurable mimetic excitement also impacts on women’s motivations. As Hayley suggested:

*It's a challenge, and really, I don't think you can get that adrenaline rush from many other activities you know when someone is in the ring and really looking to hurt you and you're kind of against them...you know you've got an audience, people watching and it's the challenge and the adrenaline rush I think...There is that element of danger but that's possibly what makes it so exciting.*

Similar to the sport of MMA in Sanchez & Malcolm's (2010) study, it is argued Muay Thai lies within the margins of real and mock combat in a society where there is an expectation of increasing self-discipline and restraint. Women especially are expected to show a greater degree of restraint due to the ideals of femininity such as passiveness and submissiveness and the association of these characteristics with soft emotions that are diametrically opposed to aggression (Thing, 2001). Therefore the thresholds of violence may be gendered and women in Muay Thai experience pleasurable excitement by opposing disciplined ideals of femininity. As Anderson (2008) states, an experience can be cathartic when emotions are released which are not usually associated with their everyday life, such as females engagement in aggressive activities. The interviewees also acknowledged that the mimetic nature of Muay Thai impacts on audience excitement. For instance, Amy stated the potential motivations for people to watch Muay Thai:

*There's obviously those people who like to see brutal stuff...well that's the sort of question*



*that's gone down sort of in history really you know like the Romans and the Gladiators...I don't know what it is, two people hurting each other.*

Likewise, Hayley discussed her experiences of Muay Thai in both Thailand and the United Kingdom, arguing:

*The gambling is a major factor, it is a major factor over here [Thailand], you know most of the crowds out here at the major stadiums are gamblers so you know they love the exciting fights, they love gambling money. In the west I don't know exactly I mean similar, people love to watch a bit of violence, two people sort of testing themselves in the ring.*

The suggestion “*people love to watch a bit of violence*” indicates it is the level of realness in the sport of Muay Thai and the idea it mimics a dangerous activity which make the sport exciting for audiences by creating tension-balances. Similar to Sanchez and Malcolm's (2010) analysis of MMA, violence is openly available to audiences in a sport involving direct attack, fighting and fear. It is argued tension-excitement can be produced for audiences in a somewhat de-controlled sport (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). However, participants also acknowledged that the level of emotional arousal, to some extent, has to be controlled to prevent the sport from crossing the boundaries to an uncivilised activity (Dunning, 1999). It is important that Muay Thai represents the balance between brutality and boredom and therefore danger and safety

(Dunning, 1999). If the rules of the sport are too routinised it loses excitement but if the rules are too relaxed 'this can lead to behaviour which transcends the bounds of what is regarded as civilized' (Dunning, 1999, p.30). For example, Sophie stated:

*There's a lot more regulations nowadays, you know you do get injuries but it might not even be another person who's inflicting that, so yeah I don't really see it as any worse than like football or anything.*

Similar views were highlighted by Olivia:

*I guess because boxing and that are known as sort of a head hunting sport and people say it's violent don't they, so there's more chance of something happening to you but I've had 28 fights and you know I've had, and I'd better touch some wood quickly, I've had one black eye from fights and the most I've had is some lumps on my leg.*

The de-controlling aspect of sports such as Muay Thai have become more routinised and controlled through more comprehensive rules and regulations which have restricted the potential for harm (Dunning, 1999). Although Muay Thai replicates real combat, it does not have the same level of violence and thus the chance of severe harm is limited (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). It is argued that this level of control makes the sport enjoyable for participants as it does not cross the threshold of repugnance (Elias & Dunning,

1986). Despite participating in a full contact, combat sport, Emily was not comfortable with the idea of being violent to another person:

*I've always thought about it more technically, so more like jab, cross, hook, kick kind of thing. I've always kind of planned what my technique is going to be rather than thinking about my opponent. I'm not sure I'd be comfortable with thinking about trying to hurt somebody.*

Emily has internalised the rules of the sport and like many fighters aims to win according to the rules (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). She considers Muay Thai technically as opposed to violently, meaning participation is unlikely to lead to feelings of guilt (Elias & Dunning, 1986). Similar to MMA, Muay Thai's more stringent rules and regulations through the sportization process means the sport can remain enjoyable and rarely crosses over to the sphere of non-mimetic, serious and dangerous situations (Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006).

***"I think for me it was that complete release" – Muay Thai as a Counteract to Everyday Life***

It was acknowledged that, at times, Muay Thai could be a routinised, controlled activity, especially at the elite level. Training leading up to a fight was often considered stressful and emotionally and physically draining, but essential to success. For instance, Jade suggested:

*That last week leading up to a fight you do other things and you prepare your food and*

*decide what times you're going to eat and what times you're going to drink, and what times you're going to do different types of training.*

Prior to a fight, Muay Thai training can involve establishing more of a routine than is necessary in day-to-day life which entails stricter physical and emotional control. Beth explained:

*You can't drink because you're training, you've got to diet, it's hard being a girl fighter, your friends don't understand, I'm training every night, can't drink, can't eat what I want, its hard sometimes but it's worth it when you fight.*

As Dunning (1999) suggests, when leisure involves strict control it can become too repetitive and consequently loses its meaning as a de-routinising activity. Therefore Muay Thai may not always be used as a release as it can be routinised. In the research by Liston (2006b, p.626), it is argued the 'motivations of females who compete at the elite levels have much in common with those of men' whereby it is suggested elite female athletes in football and Gaelic football may use sport for enjoyment and to de-stress. In contrast, this research suggests for elite-level female fighters, Muay Thai may not always be used in this way as the sport has the potential to be demanding and repetitive prior to important competitions. Despite this discussion of the routinised aspects of the sport, interviewees also suggested that other elements of Muay Thai could be used as a 'pleasurable and de-routinizing emotional arousal' (Dunning, 1999, p.3). It is argued fights have the potential to allow the release of emotions that are not expected in everyday life. Laura described fighting as "*such an*

*emotional rollercoaster”* and Jade discussed the elements of fighting which make the routinised aspects of the sport worthwhile, stating *“all of a sudden you win and it’s like a weight lifted from you”*. Holly added:

*Coming out of the ring I just cried my eyes out  
just ‘cause it felt so scary and just so much  
adrenaline.*

Holly discusses her experiences of anxiety and for competitors in Muay Thai emotions are ‘tensed between opposites of fear and elation’ (Dunning, 1999, p.27). Muay Thai is used as an emotional outlet and despite experiencing fear, Jade stated *“when the ref like shakes your arms and says it’s all over its elation.”* Muay Thai may involve the release of contrasting emotions, but winning can mean ‘all fears and anxieties are temporarily resolved’ (Dunning, 1999, p.27). Training without the pressure of an imminent fight was also described as an emotional outlet. Olivia discussed feeling *“re-energised and de-stressed”* after training, and Zoe described the sport as *“really invigorating”*. Likewise, Holly stated:

*It really does help and recently I split up with my  
boyfriend, and everyone was just like go out  
and drink and party but I don’t think that helps,  
all I want to do is go to the gym and hit things,  
because you get it out and you’re not carrying  
around all that anger and upset, you can train it  
out and you feel a lot better for it, and it’s a  
positive way of doing things rather than just  
drinking and making yourself feel even more*

*worse about it...I feel better after leaving and it's different 'cause it's contact, like kicking things, and it's just like everyone thinks automatically that Thai boxing is going to be violent, it's not always, like obviously the fights are but training is just like a really good vent and I think that's why people get hooked to it.*

The greater self-regulation of emotions is argued to have occurred throughout the civilising process and therefore a release of anger may counteract the control of emotions in modern life (Thing, 2001). Similar to females in male-associated team sports in the research by Thing (2001), Muay Thai may allow the open expression of emotions such as anger and aggression which are considered inappropriate in day-to-day life, especially for females. Emily agreed, stating the elements of the sport that attracted her to it were *"the fact that it's so physical, I loved that sort of aggressive element of it, that getting rid of your tension kind of thing"*. The sport may be considered de-routinising for females, as through participation in a masculine sport they go against conventional routine. Comparable to Thing's (2001) research, women in Muay Thai go against feminine expectations by enjoying the full-contact aspect of the sport in order to release aggression and de-stress. In contrast to more appropriately feminine activities, Muay Thai entails actions that are less disciplined and it is argued a significant motivating factor for females is the search for physical contact often unavailable in female-associated sports (Thing, 2001). Similar to females in Australian-rules football in the study by Wedgwood (2004) female Muay Thai fighters generally rejected sports

considered feminine or gender neutral. For example, Emily discussed the physicality available in Muay Thai compared to other sports:

*I think for me it was that complete release, although hockey and running and all the rest are a physical game and are quite social you don't get quite that same, I'm not really an aggressive person but that sort of stress release that kind of almost you could take everything that you had and just leave it in the gym, however bad your day was you could leave it in the gym and you definitely don't get that with a team sport like hockey or even running, or I don't anyway...It's that contact that sort of, you know when you've made an impact on the pads, even if you're not even fighting, even just pad work, you know it's that sort of a release isn't it that you don't quite get hitting a ball, if that makes sense.*

As Maguire and Mansfield (1998) state certain activities are highly regulated and therefore require greater levels of self-restraint. However, contact sports which are frequently considered male preserves are perceived by Emily as more de-routinised and may consequently be used to elicit pleasurable excitement for women. Even after participating in football, a male-associated contact sport, for several years, Chloe discussed her greater enjoyment of Muay Thai:

*The thing I liked about Thai boxing it were kind of full on which fit my personality really, I mean on my first session they let me hit pads and things like that and I thought this is fantastic, it's definitely me...The way that I fight sort of thing because I'm quite aggressive it just fitted me as a person I think.*

Expressing aggression and being physical in female Muay Thai is considered 'a break in the routine of their everyday life...connected with a feeling of freedom' (Thing, 2001, p.281). A similar outcome can be found in the research by Wedgwood (2004) where females in Australian-rules football participated as a means to seek out physical autonomy. Chloe, Emily and Holly's quotes suggest that, likewise, the physical contact drew them to Muay Thai. As Anderson (2008) states in his analysis of triathlon competitors, breaking physical boundaries can be emotionally exhilarating for participants. The higher degree of freedom in Muay Thai and the element of unpredictability evident in both training and competition was also discussed. Louise stated her attraction to the sport was *"I think the action, you know it's quite a fast paced, you never know what's going to happen"* and equally Amy stated:

*I enjoy sparring because it keeps you on your toes and it's more stimulating because you have to, its more interesting because you just don't know what's going to happen next*



*whereas I don't really enjoy doing repetitive stuff.*

In addition to mimetic factors, motility satisfactions can be gained from sports by women which may motivate them (Dunning, 1999). Beth also described fighting in Muay Thai as impulsive and more so than similar combat sports such as boxing, indicating that the motility satisfactions specifically from Muay Thai drew her to the sport:

*Boxing you've got one thing to think about, whereas Thai boxing you know, kicks, knees, elbows, boxing, there's so much you can work on and it's not a predictable sport as well like one girl might beat one girl because of certain things and then she could fight someone else and beat them and like you can never predict who's going to win as well which keeps it exciting.*

According to Dunning (1999) the extent to which a leisure activity is de-routinising depends on the level of uncertainty, anxiety and insecurity which it entails and Muay Thai involves a live circumstance with sometimes unexpected outcomes. This serves to keep the sport exciting and less routinised, even in comparison to other combat sports. Thus in contrast to none-leisure activities, such as spare-time routines, Muay Thai may be significantly less routinised and has the potential to entail considerable elements of de-controlling. Louise discussed the counterbalance Muay Thai training had to her everyday routine when she first started training:

*Well just because I'd just had children and I hadn't trained for ages, when I was in school I used to like PE, hockey, netball, running and stuff like that, and then I had children, especially having twins I didn't have any time to myself, and then I went back to doing something and I just found Thai boxing was like the perfect sport for me...I mean so many of our students they don't come in to fight, they just come in to de-stress, whether it's from everyday life or their home life or their work life.*

Louise discusses Muay Thai as a counter to everyday routines such as working, household activities and looking after children. As Dunning (1999) suggests, a motivational source for women to enter sport may be to counteract the dissatisfactions of routinised activities which females have often been constrained to in patriarchal societies, and therefore women may desire equality with men. However, it is argued participation in Muay Thai does not necessarily mean gender equality.

***“I only started fighting because they were really against women fighting” -  
Setbacks for Women in Muay Thai and a Desire for Equality with Men***

From a figurational perspective, men and women are interdependent and it is important to analyse relations of power in regards to gender (Dunning, 1999). It is argued the gap is closing between men's and women's power chances, although this has not been a linear process and in the present day

'unequal social relations exist between men and women' (de Swaan, 2005, p.50). It was acknowledged that certain aspects of the sport, such as the training they were involved in, were often considered equal between males and females. For example, Beth and Chloe discussed the physical equality they had experienced in Muay Thai regardless of gender, with Beth stating *"when it comes to the class everyone spars and everyone clinches together, there's no divide it's just everyone"*. Chloe added:

*You know it's straight down the middle, whether you're male or female if you're running six mile, you are running six mile. If he's doing 100 press ups, you're doing 100 press ups, the way that my instructors look at it is it's not about gender, it's about whether you're a fighter, and this is what you do if you're a fighter.*

Likewise, Emily suggested her success positively influenced the way in which she was perceived by males at the gym:

*I think because I was the most successful fighter we had at the gym the boys really respected me so actually they would push me and they knew they were pushing me and they knew, they all felt sort of part of my fight camp as well as I did theirs. I don't know, I really I had a really good relationship with all the boys in the gym and it was kind of a really mutually respectful erm encouraging competitive*

*relationship you know we pushed each other along a little bit and we'd erm support each other so yeah I found it really good to have male fighters in the gym with us.*

It is suggested that, to some extent, Muay Thai can be a gender equal sport. This shows similarities to the research by Channon (2013) who suggests in gender-integrated sports there is a greater chance of females gaining respect from males as men are able to see women's sporting capabilities. Men and women often engage in the same training regimes, meaning myths of female weakness may be eradicated. Sports such as Muay Thai involve a rare opportunity for equal sporting spaces for males and females, and Emily's comments suggest it is an opportunity to develop cohesion with one another. However, it must be considered that in competitive Muay Thai the gender boundaries are clearly demarcated with separate spaces for males and females who do not compete against one another in competition. In line with the argument by Dunning (1999), females have challenged and achieved entry into sports which were once male preserves, but this does not necessarily mean gender equality and there may be aspects of sports which discourage female entry. For example, interviewees discussed several examples of inequalities, with Holly stating:

*Oh yeah men get paid more than women for fighting, usually even if they are in the same sort of league, which I think is really unfair, you're training the same, you're taking the same risks stepping into the ring, and you're*

*fighting the same rules. I think women should be paid the same amount as men, I don't think that men are more entertaining, I think a lot of people will actually come in to watch females, and the female fighters have a massive fan base around them, and so I think that they should be paid the same, they do everything else the same.*

As Holly suggests, there are limitations placed on female's success such as pay disparities between men and women. It is also suggested that there are possibilities for gender-integrated sports to uphold stereotypes of females as weaker or more fragile. For example, Zoe stated:

*I've trained alongside male fighters who don't want to hit a girl or who think they're much better than you just 'cause you're a girl and they're actually rubbish.*

Within martial arts it is a common perception that men are naturally superior (Velija et al., 2012). It is also recognised that gender-integrated sports can mean gender stereotypes are accentuated as opposed to eradicated through training (Channon, 2013). Channon (2013) states this can occur when men show higher skill levels than women in sparring or, in Zoe's instance, when men assume women have lower skills and capabilities. The assumption of lower standards for women was also stated by Jade who argued *"every time I sparred a guy I thought I had to prove myself to him"*. This research therefore suggests that aspects of Muay Thai do promote gender equality, but the sport is not

entirely gender equal and is often understood as a male-dominated, masculine sport. Because of these setbacks and barriers, a motivation for women to continue to participate is argued to be a desire for equality with men. For instance, Holly stated of her desire to be treated equally in all aspects of training, arguing *“I don’t like being treated like I can’t do what the men can do, I really hate that.”* Likewise, Emily considered her experiences at a previous gym:

*The gym that I trained at when I very first started fighting I only started fighting because they were really against women fighting, so it were really a protest vote, I didn’t have any intention of being a Thai boxer, but you know for me it worked really well and I quite liked that having to prove somebody wrong all the time...a lot of the young lads would want to come and fight me and properly fight me, so you know it was kind of like having a full on match every lesson in sparring.*

It is suggested one of Emily’s motivations to continue in the sport of Muay Thai is to prove that she had equal or greater capabilities than the males in her gym. Women’s ambitions in Muay Thai may also include progressing the sport for women by increasing the number of females participating, and therefore making a move towards gender equality. For example, Zoe stated:

*Part of my sort of next ambition I suppose is when I eventually give up fighting is to promote the female side of the sport, promote it more*

*with females and get more girls involved so it's not such a male dominated sport...It's getting more girls you know not just competing but also teaching as well and that's what I want to concentrate on more when I give up competing is actually teaching.*

Dunning (1999, p.231) states that certain sports, such as boxing and rugby, have been labelled 'categorically unacceptable' for females as they embody masculine characteristics such as aggression and power to a greater extent than other sports. It is suggested Muay Thai fits this category as it involves the expression of traditionally male traits through direct physical attack. As McNaughton (2012, p.2) argues in her auto-ethnography of Muay Thai, 'intense physical challenge coupled with minimal protective gear render combat sport close to something of a conservatory for hegemonic masculinity.' In Thailand for instance, women are still forbidden to fight at some major stadiums due to tradition. In addition to Dunning's (1999, p.231) argument that women are motivated to participate in sport 'as a result of frustrations experienced over the constraints and limitations traditionally placed on female roles' such as the domestic sphere, it is argued a motivation for female Muay Thai fighters is to challenge ideas of appropriate femininity. This is shown through Zoe's statement suggesting more females should be introduced and encouraged to participate in Muay Thai as fighters and teachers, regardless of the idea it is perceived as masculine. Therefore female Muay Thai boxers may resist the perception that women should display appropriate emotional discipline in only non-violent sports.

Furthermore, Dunning (1999, p.231) suggests that women have been motivated to participate in sports for greater 'self-concept, self-assurance and habitus' including personal safety in public. Women may be motivated to participate in Muay Thai for self-defence reasons and to challenge ideas of female weakness, an argument put forward by Eva:

*I would encourage people just to come along  
and have some fun and stay fit and take up a  
new skill that can help them if ever they needed  
to get away from a bad situation because this is  
a martial art that you can actually use in the  
street.*

Although not the sole motivation for participation, Eva suggests her capacity to defend herself against an attack has increased through training. In the research by Velija et al. (2012) females in martial arts increased their physical strength which in turn developed their confidence to defend themselves if needed and reject victimisation. Women who gain physical strength also have the potential to challenge stereotypical perceptions of females such as weakness (Velija et al., 2012). Within this investigation Laura discussed her participation in Muay Thai as a challenge to perceptions that women are not physically strong:

*I think it makes you tougher like you know some  
guys think girls are really weak or you know she  
can't even cope with a bruise or whatever.*

Furthermore, Zoe and Eva discussed developing physical strength as empowering, with Zoe stating "after you've delivered...a good strike and it's



*actually stopped them and your strength has overpowered them it's satisfying"* and Eva adding *"you'll be surprised how strong you are when you've actually learnt these techniques"*. Later, Eva stated:

*It's nice to know that I'm that strong and I'm going up against the best athletes in the world and I've got that power, strength and technique to stop them so it's you know, so it's a really good feeling to know your ability.*

Even in sports such as martial arts, females are often told to accept their physical inferiority (Velija et al., 2012). Nonetheless, this can altered, and it is argued female Muay Thai fighters often challenge this assumption by gaining physical strength, challenging stereotypical perceptions of females and in turn resisting notions of femininity and the female body ideal. Similar to females in Australian-rules football researched by Wedgwood (2004), women in Muay Thai may experience physical strength through the contact factor of the sport and the realisation they are stronger than they initially considered. In contrast to some females in wrestling and judo who de-emphasised their physical strength to avoid stigma (Sisjord & Kristiansen, 2008; Guerandel & Mennesson, 2007), it is suggested some women in Muay Thai may embrace this factor of the sport. It is also suggested a link exists between physical and mental strength (Velija et al., 2012). Dunning's (1999) suggestion that women are likely to be motivated to participate in sport for the potential to construct an identity or habitus embodying self-confidence and self-worth was discussed. Sophie stated Muay Thai helped her become *"more assertive"* and Emily expanded:

*When you've been training for a little while just that ability to let go off that aggression means that you feel more confident walking around...I think that that sort of training gives particularly women the confidence just to walk around and be themselves, and I think that's probably the thing when I speak to young girls about it doing Thai boxing, that's probably the thing that I really say to them is you know if you feel like you're strong then you feel that you can be yourself in any bit of your life.*

Therefore, it is suggested one of the incentives for women in Muay Thai is a desire for equality with men as suggested by Dunning (1999). Aside from Dunning's (1999) suggestion that sports can counteract the frustrations of traditionally female roles, females in Muay Thai endeavour to challenge stereotypical notions of femininity through gaining physical equality in training, promoting the female side of the sport and to increase physical and mental strength which can transfer to self-defence. Emily's quote suggests she resists feminine expectations through challenging the idea females should have emotional and physical restraint and therefore should not engage in aggressive behaviour. As a result, female participation in Muay Thai may have the potential to confront the traditional gender order, although the quest for equality is not straightforward and there are evidently limitations placed on women's success.

This additionally shows there are intended and unintended consequences to women's participation in masculine sports. The intended

consequences are women may gain mimetic satisfactions and pleasure from sport, having the opportunity to participate in activities which were once solely for men (Thing, 2001). From this perspective, women may challenge male dominance and hegemony by resisting limitations traditionally placed on women. The unintended consequences are that women may value masculine characteristics and de-value certain aspects of femininity. It is consequently argued that experiences of the quest for excitement may be gendered as females have had to break down barriers and gender ideals in order to participate in non feminine-appropriate sports, and their experiences of the quest for excitement incorporate a desire for female equality. The perception that women go against expectations of femininity in Muay Thai leads to questions regarding the negotiation of their elite status in a masculine sport.

***“I think people have images in their heads where you might not be feminine so they’re shocked” - Negotiation of Elite Status in a Masculine Sport***

It is suggested that aspects of Muay Thai are challenging, aggressive, and violent with a level of realness similar to combat, which indicates masculine characteristics are prominent in the sport. This implies that the features of Muay Thai which arguably make it exciting have direct links to masculine values. As stated, ideals of femininity formed by men through the civilising process still remain, to some extent, in modern societies (Mennell, 1992). According to Dunning (1999) throughout the civilising process there have been changes at an ‘ideological and value level’ of what comprises appropriate female behaviour, although full-contact, combat sports may still be considered undesirable or

inappropriate for women. It is a common view that the female body should be civilised 'in accordance to established ideals of feminine beauty' and therefore self-control over female bodies is expected and encouraged (Mansfield, 2002, p.329). As a result, this may affect how female participants are viewed by others, as through participation females reject traditionally feminine characteristics such as weakness and submissiveness in favour of traditionally masculine characteristics such as aggression. Amy discussed how traditional female roles and feminine embodiment were in utter contrast to the sport of Muay Thai and the reaction she has received from males about her participation and success in the sport:

*Girls are sort of fragile, you know they're supposed to, they're seen as supposed to be like housewives and raise children and be caring and be nice and gentle so they [males] see it as sort of strange obviously...like my granddad always says no one will marry you because you'll end up looking like a bulldog.*

Women's entry into former male preserves is argued to have had an effect on men, who may feel threatened by female intrusion and be opposed to female participation and success (Dunning, 1999; Cove & Young, 2007). Amy's comments suggest Muay Thai conflicts with characteristics that are often considered innately female, such as being gentle and caring, and consequently the feminine habitus of female Muay Thai boxers may be disrupted (McNaughton, 2012). This has the potential to impact on the amount of women taking part in sports such as Muay Thai, with Beth stating:

*It's not what a lot of people expect, and people stereotype fighting as being brutal and aggressive and it's not something nice, especially for girls to be involved in.*

Olivia agreed, suggesting the social construction of masculinity and femininity impacts on the sports considered acceptable for males and females from an early age:

*My younger brother he did karate and stuff and he was always watching martial arts films and I think probably deep down I really wished I could do something like that but obviously being a girl I kind of thought that I'd never be able to do it or you know you'd get the micky taken out of you.*

This shows similarities to the research by Stickney (2005) in which females initially considered karate too masculine to participate in, and therefore did not consider taking up the sport until later in life. Likewise, Olivia's comment suggests female participation in male-associated sports can result in stigma as the sport is still considered inappropriate. It is suggested that females who engage in violent and aggressive behaviours experience greater feelings of embarrassment, guilt or shame. Some females may desire to participate in masculine sports to experience physicality and the loosening of emotional and physical restraint which counteract feminine activities (Thing, 2001). On one hand, it is argued females may experience a quest for excitement by going against feminine expectations. However, participation also has the potential to

lead to feelings of constraint due to the need to display femininity or feminine aspects of the game. Imogen stated:

*It's not all about being strong you know...it's not about whether you're big or not, it's about technique...you know we can be more technical than the men most of the time.*

It is argued that some women in Muay Thai emphasise technical aspects of the sport which could be classed as more feminine. This shows similarities to the work of Guerandel and Mennesson (2007) who argued females favoured technical work over physical in judo and gave emphasis to technical aspects of the sport as a way to reaffirm their femininity. The female footballers and Gaelic footballers studied by Liston (2005) also argued their game was more about skills than physicality. Imogen's comment may therefore be considered as a way to avert criticism of her participation in a masculine sport (Liston, 2005). Aside from the emphasis on technicality, some interviewees also highlighted other aspects of their lives or their appearance to counteract the masculine characteristics they embody. For example, Holly's traditionally female career may counter the fact she is a successful fighter, in turn minimising the stigma she is likely to receive:

*My job is a beauty therapist so if I'm talking to clients during the day and they ask if I have a hobby or anything like that they're usually quite shocked 'cause I can be there one minute painting nails and waxing and things like that, and then I pack up from the salon and head off*

*to the gym and then I'll be sparring and training  
for a fight.*

In comparison, Olivia emphasised her feminine appearance, suggesting others often stereotype female fighters to appear masculine. This relates to the work of Mennesson (2000) regarding female boxers who emphasised femininity through their outfits after fights:

*People kind of, I think 'cause I'm quite like a  
girly girl you know 'cause I've got long hair and I  
look feminine I think people are always shocked  
because people do stereotype, like if you're  
going to be a boxer or something then you're  
going to have to look like a boy which isn't the  
case, obviously you've got like (name) and  
(name), like none of those girls look like boys.*

It is often considered by others that females who participate in sports such as Muay Thai may be considered butch or lesbian, as they counteract traditionally female traits which are perceived to link to heterosexuality (Mennesson, 2012). Some females in Muay Thai deal with the contradiction of their participation by counteracting the masculine aspects of the game through dress, appearance, other aspects of their lives such as work, and an emphasis on the technicalities of the sport. Although females may desire equality with men as part of their experiences of the quest for excitement, and do this by challenging certain notions of femininity, it could be argued 'women in traditionally masculine sports have to deal with a paradox' and can also conform to feminine

ideals (Guerandel & Mennesson, 2007, p.168). Similar to McNaughton's (2012) study, women may accentuate some trappings of femininity (such as ideals of feminine beauty) while discarding others (such as weakness and passivity). Consequently their involvement 'does not necessarily result in the dissolving of gender dichotomies' (Dunning, 1999; Velija et al., 2012, p.14) but may be a means to negotiate their elite status in professional Muay Thai boxing.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research used the figurational concept of the quest for excitement to analyse the motivations of professional females in Muay Thai. Females experience a quest for excitement as Muay Thai has a likeness to battle and imitates true fighting but with more comprehensive rules and regulations which minimise risk (Sanchez & Malcolm, 2010). In particular, it was highlighted that Muay Thai is a replication of survival and a relatively true form of fighting which entails 'a unique combination of intentional and open conflict' (Sanchez-Garcia & Malcolm, 2010, p.55). For the female participants of this study, the imitation of danger in the sport is one of the aspects which make it exciting and motivate women to fight. As Van Krieken (1998) states, pleasurable excitement becomes available for participants only if the rules of the sport clearly establish certain limits which lessen the potential for danger. Females in this study emphasise the use of skills, technique and tactics and the minimal injuries they receive as elements of the sport which prevent it from crossing these boundaries. The sample of participants in this research are additionally motivated to train and compete as the sport has allowed them to experience physical contact and can be described as an emotional and physical catharsis. Thus Muay Thai is considered de-routinised, especially when competing. Similar to research uncovered in the study by Thing (2001, p.280) this may be part of the 'processes of leisure enjoyment', whereby females can engage in controlled aggression and counteract controlled emotions connected with both modern societies and, more precisely, notions of femininity.

Muay Thai can act as a release from everyday self-regulation and self-control to become a source of excitement in contemporary civilised societies

which may be unexciting (Elias & Dunning, 1987; Van Krieken, 1998). From the findings of this thesis it is argued the level of tension and mimesis in Muay Thai is often perceived as superior in comparison to both feminine-appropriate and other combat sports. In contrast to sports such as boxing, Muay Thai has a greater variety of methods of attack and defence which is assumed to create a higher level of unpredictability. In addition, physical contact in Muay Thai is understood as stimulating as it counteracts expectations of femininity that are highlighted in traditionally female sports. Thus, the findings of this thesis suggest females in this study reject many feminine-appropriate sports as they may fail to generate the same levels of excitement. Through participation in Muay Thai, controlled aggression is expressed which breaks traditionally gendered rules regarding emotions (Thing, 2001). Therefore, females may experience Muay Thai as a de-routinising activity as participation counteracts the routine of everyday life where females should be disciplined in regards to emotions (Thing, 2001). Dunning (1999) argues that women have presumably been motivated to participate in sport to gain mimetic factors that males have acquired in sports, and this research may confirm that, to some extent, females in Muay are motivated on this basis.

Although many of the reasons cited by interviewees for participating in Muay Thai show similarities to the mimetic factors that have motivated men to participate in sport, it is also argued that experiences of the quest for excitement can be gendered. In spite of the changes in acceptable female behaviour and habitus through the course of the civilising process, and the relative empowerment of women in Western societies in general, sports involving direct attack which incorporate masculine values may still be understood as categorically unacceptable for women (Dunning, 1999). As a result of the

civilising process, aggressive behaviour is unexpected in general, but more so for women who are expected to be in control of their emotions (Thing, 2001) and therefore women in Muay Thai experience a quest for excitement by challenging these expectations. As Muay Thai is a male-dominated sport which idealises masculinity, women in Muay Thai have had to defy the values and norms established as appropriate feminine behaviour in order to participate and compete. Therefore, women may desire gender equality and their aspirations for success in a masculine sport may be a way of emphasising this. Interviewees in this study discussed overcoming stereotypes and barriers to their participation, and their desire to be treated equally to men in the sport. Despite their access to the sport of Muay Thai and the success that has accompanied it, there are still constraints to women's involvement such as the fact they are often paid less than professional males and the stereotypes that are attached to their involvement.

The women interviewed aspire for equality with men in Muay Thai by challenging these constraints, aiming to encourage more women to participate and by resisting the idea it is an inappropriate sport for women. These women challenge the convention that females should only participate in feminine-associated sports, as they argue it is more difficult to experience the same mimetic and motility satisfactions that are available in Muay Thai. It is argued elements of sports which make them exciting represent traditional notions of masculinity and although women desire equality with men, they often accentuate their femininity in a variety of ways in order to negotiate their elite status in a male-associated sport. Therefore, women in masculine sports may feel constrained to some extent to highlight their femininity and traditionally feminine values. Ultimately, this research adds to the existing literature on the

figurational concept of the quest for excitement in sports, in particular women's experiences, concluding that women in Muay Thai can indeed experience a quest for excitement. Nevertheless, the limitations of this research must also be addressed and these include the fact that only one method of data collection was used and that a wider theoretical consideration may be required to broaden our understanding. For example, many strands of feminist theory would suggest that women's participation in sports such as Muay Thai is problematic as females idealise traditional male characteristics, an argument highlighted by Velija et al. (2012). Future research could also address women's experiences of the quest for excitement at a recreational level in sport.

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## Appendix A – Letter of Invitation



Catherine Phipps

08/01/2013

Dear participant,

As part of a research project for the course MSc Sociology of Sport and Exercise at University of Chester, I am undertaking a research project on female Muay Thai boxers. Specifically, the research will be centred on the motivations of females in Muay Thai boxing in both training and competition.

The research involves an interview which will be recorded, in which questions about your past and current involvement in training and competition will be asked. The interview will take no longer than 30 minutes and is completely voluntary.

The interview is simply seeking information on your experiences and is completely confidential. The interview will remain anonymous and your name will be changed for the purpose of the study, as we do not wish to identify you or the club in which you train. If you are interested, please read the information sheet provided in your own time. If you would then like to take part, please return the informed consent form via email, which should only take a few minutes.

If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours Faithfully,

Catherine Phipps

## Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet



### The Quest for Excitement in Professional Female Muay Thai Boxing

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you can decide whether or not to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being conducted and what is required from you. Please take as much time as you need to read the following information and discuss it with myself (Catherine Phipps – contact details below) if you wish. If you do not understand something, would like further information, or would like to ask any questions, please feel free to ask. You may take as much time as you need to make a decision whether or not to participate. Thank you in advance for reading this information sheet, and for your interest in this study.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

The research is being undertaken on female adult Muay Thai boxers and will take approximately 20-30 minutes of your time. The project aims to find out the experiences and motivations of female Muay Thai boxers to participate and compete. Previous academic research has mainly been conducted by interviewing men. Some investigations have looked at female athletes, although these are limited mainly to female footballers. Therefore, the aims of the research are to better understand the motivations of female Muay Thai boxers.

#### Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen as you are a highly experienced and well known female Muay Thai boxer, and are 18 years old or above. You have been chosen amongst other participants.

#### Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you would like to take part. If you decide you would like to take part you can keep this information sheet and will be provided with a consent form to sign. If you decide to take part and then change your mind, this is fine. You will be able to withdraw from the research at any time, without being asked for a reason. This will not affect you in any way.

#### What will happen to me if I take part?

You will participate in a 20-30 minute interview with the researcher (Catherine Phipps) via phone or Skype. This will be at no cost to you. You will be asked questions based upon your motivations and experiences, and you will be given the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. You will only be required to participate in one interview, which will be recorded and transcribed. After all participants have been interviewed, the researcher will check the interview transcriptions for common themes which will allow them to answer the research



question. The data collected will be kept on a password protected computer and only the researcher will have access to this information. The information will additionally be kept for at least ten years.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The only possible risk is that you are asked a question in which you are not comfortable answering. We do not wish for this to happen, and if this occurs, you do not have to answer the question.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By taking part, you will be contributing to our understanding of females' motivations in martial arts.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact Professor Sarah Andrew, Dean of the Faculty of Applied Sciences, University of Chester, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ, 01244 513055.

Will my taking part in the research be kept confidential?

All information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. You will not be identified within the investigation, and only the researcher will know you have taken part and have access to the information provided. During the write-up of the research, alternative names will be used.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be written up as part of my dissertation for my master's degree. Participants will not be identified in any subsequent publication. If you would like a summary of the results of the research when available, please contact the researcher.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research conducted is part of an MSc in Sociology of Sport and Exercise at University of Chester within the Department of Sport and Exercise Science. The research is being conducted by Catherine Phipps, with Dr. Ian Pritchard as a supervisor.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like any further information about the study before you make your decision, please contact Catherine Phipps via email: [@chester.ac.uk](mailto:@chester.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and for your interest in this research.

## Appendix C – Example Consent Form



University of  
Chester

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Title of Project: The Quest for Excitement in Professional Female Muay Thai Boxing

Name of Researcher: Catherine Phipps

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected.
3. I agree to take part in the above study, and agree to my interview being tape-recorded.

☐☐☐

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Name of Participant

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Date

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Signature

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

1 for participant; 1 for researcher

## Appendix D – Interview Schedule



- Can you tell me how you first got involved in Thai Boxing? (What age? When? How? What influenced you to go? How did it feel when you first started training?)
- Can you tell me what you enjoy about training?
- Did you play any other sports competitively? (What was the transition like? What do you get from Thai boxing that's different to your other sports?)
- What do you enjoy about participating in a full-contact sport?
- Can you remember the first time you hit someone? How did that feel?
- Can you remember the first time you got hit? How did that feel?
- Do you think your reasons for participating in the sport have changed since you started?
- What made you want to get in the ring and fight?
- Can you tell me about your first fight? (What did you enjoy about it?)
- Can you tell me about a recent fight?
- Can you talk me through a typical training session and what it involves?
- How demanding do you think Thai boxing is?
- What motivates you even though it's so demanding?
- How would you describe Thai boxing to others? (How would you promote it? What's unique about Thai boxing?)
- How do you feel after a training session?
- What are the benefits of participating/fighting?
- Can you tell me how it feels to win a fight?
- Can you tell me how it felt winning your world/European title?
- Can you tell me how it feels to lose a fight?
- What motivates you to continue participation after you have lost?
- (If applicable) Can you tell me about your decision to retire from fighting?
- Has there been a time when you have not regularly participated in Thai boxing?
- (If applicable) Can you tell me what it felt like to not participate in Thai boxing during this time?
- What does it take to be successful in the sport?
- How do people react when you mention your involvement as a female in this sport?
- How open have you been about your participation to others? Why?

- Is the training environment mixed-sex?
- Do you have mixed sparring? Does sparring with men differ to sparring with women? How?
- Can you tell me what it is like to train alongside male fighters?
- How male-dominated do you think Thai boxing is?
- Do you ever feel the need to prove yourself as a female in a male-dominated sport?
- Do you feel you gain the same amount of respect as men do as a fighter in Thai boxing?
- In your opinion what is the public's perception of female Thai boxers?
- How are female Thai boxers marketed? Does this differ to men?
- What do you think could be done to increase women's involvement in Thai boxing?